

Song Exploder
Rachel Platten - Broken Glass
Episode 122

Hrishikesh: You're listening to Song Exploder, where musicians take apart their songs and piece by piece tell the story of how they were made. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway.

("Broken Glass" by RACHEL PLATTEN)

Hrishikesh: Rachel Platten is a singer and songwriter who's released four albums, including her 2016 album *Wildfire*, which went Gold. In this episode, Rachel breaks down her song "Broken Glass," which came out in August 2017.

("Broken Glass" by RACHEL PLATTEN)

(Music fades)

Rachel: My name is Rachel Platten, and I'm going to be talking about "Broken Glass" today.

Hrishikesh: But the story of "Broken Glass" really begins a couple years earlier, with another track by Rachel Platten, called "Fight Song."

("Fight Song" by RACHEL PLATTEN)

Hrishikesh: "Fight Song" broke the Top 10 on Billboard's charts,

(Music fades)

Hrishikesh: but it was also used prominently by the Hillary Clinton Presidential campaign. After that, everything changed for Rachel.

Rachel: Honestly, I am a little afraid of talking about it just because, I mean, I'll tell you some of the story that I haven't really told anyone.

Hrishikesh: First here's Mike Taylor, from Hillary Clinton's campaign team.

Mike: My name is Mike Taylor and I was the Director of Special Projects for the digital team on Hillary for America. Around the time that we were selecting music for the campaign launch, we had kind of pooled together everyone from the

campaign to put in suggestions and we looked for songs that matched Hillary's message. And "Fight Song" made that list.

Rachel: Hillary Clinton's camp reached out to me a year before "Fight Song" started being used by her. And we kept saying, "No." I was performing a lot in the middle of the country, I wasn't just performing [laughter] in like blue states, it wasn't like that. I wasn't an artist that wanted to be associated with only one side of this political spectrum. And I knew how emotionally, just, complicated that election was. So I was scared [laughter]. Oh God [sigh], I can't believe you're making me talk about [laughter] all this. It wasn't a political song. It was a song that I wrote in my bedroom, because I needed a reminder: not give up on myself. That was it. So that's why I was so hesitant. But they were trying for like a year. Hillary loved the song, and that was amazing to me. I was really proud when I first heard that. And eventually, I was like, "Yes."

Mike: Fast forward through to January 2016 going into the primary season, our slogan was "Fighting for Us" at that point in time. And so, we started making it the music that Hillary walked on the stage and walked off the stage to, at every event that she did. For us, this was a huge piece of the campaign, so by the time the DNC came around in July, it just of course made sense to have Hillary walk out to that song.

Hrishikesh: At the Democratic National Convention in July 2016, Secretary Clinton was introduced by her daughter, Chelsea.

(Chelsea Clinton introducing Hillary Clinton at DNC: "Ladies and gentlemen, my mother, my hero, and our next President, Hillary Clinton")

("Fight Song" with audience applause)

Rachel: I had no idea that my song was going to be on the stage then. I turned it on just to see her walking out to it. I'm like, I didn't really know who to call or what to do and I didn't really know how to take it in, and then I just started crying. It was incredible. Watching the first woman nominee on that stage walk out to my song.

(Hillary Clinton: "Thank you, thank you so much. Thank you")

(Audio clip fades)

Rachel: After the Democratic National Convention, I got so much hate. I got death threats over the summer. My Twitter feed was just filled with people telling me that they hated me, how dare I take “Fight Song” away from them, that it was their song, it healed them, and now they couldn’t listen to it anymore, and I was heartbroken.

Hrishikesh: The summer wore on, and the campaign season continued, and Rachel started working on a new album, what would eventually become her 2017 album, *Waves*. But all of this had affected what she was writing about in her songs.

Rachel: I’d been writing for three months for my record so far and staying far away from the empowerment songs. Because I felt like I was getting pigeonholed as like [laughter] “The Empowerment Girl.” And I took this empowerment song all the way, and I got a lot of hate from people. So I think I was like, “Let me just stay away from that stuff.” But I got into the studio that day, it was November 1st,

Hrishikesh: And at that point, everything seemed to point towards a Hillary Clinton victory.

(Audio clip of polls-only forecast: “So right now, as we are taping this, in our polls-only forecast, the FiveThirtyEight model gives Hillary Clinton a 71.8% chance of winning, Donald Trump 28.2%)

(Audio clip fades)

Rachel: I said, “I feel excited. I feel like a woman might be President, that’s incredible.” It was the first time I was working with these two guys, Nate Cyphert and Jarrad Rogers, and there was something about them that felt gentle and sweet and kind of safe. And I said, “You know, I think I want to write something empowering today. I think I can do that again.” So we started singing this song, I actually have the demo of it.

(Piano demo)

Rachel: [laughter] So this is me trying to piece out this melody that I’m hearing in my head and I can’t, my fingers are not doing what they want to. But it’s how I was hearing it at first [sings melody].

(Piano demo)

Rachel: So I was playing that, and they were like, “What should the verse be?” And I was like, “Well, maybe this is the verse.”

(Vocals with piano)

Rachel: It was going to be a song about me feeling brave enough to speak up, and not let all of that fear that was happening over the summer with the hate I was getting on the Internet, I was just going to say like, “I’m good. I’m okay standing up and speaking my mind.”

(Music fades)

Rachel: So we have this verse melody. And then, we were stuck on the chorus. And I have a title on my notes in my iPhone, for a song that did not exist. And the title is “Broken Glass.” And then I kind of realized, well maybe this is a song about this election. Maybe this is about breaking the glass ceiling and this is a song about women. And this is a song about us

(Piano)

Rachel: doing something that we thought was impossible.

(Piano)

Rachel: This is that moment in history. That moment where we were going to break that glass ceiling and it felt right.

(Vocals join: “So bring on the pain yeah, I can take it / Stump on my dreams yeah, I’m not caving / I have been patient, but I’m not waiting anymore / Not anymore, no / I’m gonna dance on broken glass, on broken glass / And I’m gonna make that ceiling crash, that ceiling crash”)

Rachel: It wasn’t just for the election, it was also just for women. I have struggled so much with using my voice, and owning my power. I’ll often like back down and defer to men around me who work for me. And I forget that I’m the boss and I forget that actually I’m in charge of all of this. So this song was also about me owning that and saying like, “I’ve gone through an awakening too, and I get to write a song about that, let’s do this.”

(Piano fades)

Rachel: So we're all gathered around the piano because we kind of made a decision, "Let's stay by the piano today." So we stayed there as long as we could, it was probably like 2 and a half hours, and then I was like, "No, this piano, I'm not playing piano at my shows anymore, I don't want this to be a piano-based song, let's move away from the piano now. Let's get some synth sounds. Let's get some like weird bass sounds." The chords were feeling too happy, I was just kind of like, "Give me something deep and like resonant." So Jarrad went and he starts with this growly synth bass.

(Synth bass)

Rachel: And then put in this really cool Caribbean kind of beat.

(Beat joins)

(Synth bass fades)

(Beat)

(Beat fades)

Rachel: He originally gave me that because I lived in Trinidad for a year and a half, and I was telling him about it. I was in this soca band, and I toured with them. And I would love to make a song that feels like that, that has some of that element. So he actually used steel drum.

(Steel drum)

(Beat and synth bass join)

Rachel: So one section's looping and gradually more and more things are added to it. And words start flowing that way.

(Music ends)

Rachel: The words are, "I'm on a highway full of red lights, I've lost so many long nights." And I was picturing midnight, a solitary car on this highway, being stopped every hundred yards and being so frustrated.

(Synth)

Rachel: Jarrad took the thing that I was humming.

(Humming joins)

(Humming ends)

Rachel: He took my voice actually, and twisted it into that. The image that I had, *that* felt like the soundtrack to that.

(Synth ends)

Rachel: I wanted it to feel like there was a crowd of people, but they were kind of lost, not being heard. And they were kind of being suffocated. And Jarrad just found this thing that almost sounded like someone yelling out and then drifting like a little ghost or something.

(Ghost sound)

Rachel: So finally, I got my haunting sounds. And I was like, “Now I can keep writing these words.”

(Vocals: “So what? Still got knives in my back / So what? So I’m tied to the tracks”)

Rachel: Honestly, that was me imagining Hillary, and me imagining how she might feel, how she was just taking attacks from every single angle, and how hard that must be. Everyone was looking at her as a public figure but not as a human being, just someone to attack and like blame, and we still do it now. And I think I was just trying to understand like how that might feel, and getting a taste of it over the summer, from just being associated with her just a tiny bit. I was just trying to understand how it might feel to shoulder all of that. Not just the little taste that my insecurities couldn't handle, but the massive responsibility and the negativity that she was facing from every single angle. So that line was for her.

(Vocals: “So what? Still got knives in my back / So what? So I’m tied to the tracks”)

Rachel: So then, election happened. I was in L.A. at the time. I had a session that day. I came home and yeah, like all of America, it was an emotional night, one way or the other. There was some BuzzFeed thing that was going around like little girls crying, holding up posters. The next day, I called my manager and I said, “Well, not finishing that song, forget [laughter] about that song.” And he said, “Are you

kidding? You were just telling me how the little girls' crying was affecting you and impacting you. You *absolutely* need to finish that song. This isn't for her. This is for those girls." This is so hard to talk about it because, again, I hate inserting myself in this. And I really am afraid that like, talking about this alienates fans who have every right to enjoy my music too, but things like this turn them off. It's scary to talk about because my experience last summer, honestly. But it also is just the truth of it, and I have been advised by so many people to not tell the truth about what it is about because they'll say, "Well, do you really want to deal with the repercussions of that later?" But the honest truth is that it's kind of exhausting to keep coming up with new ways to spin how I wrote the song, when the truth of it is that I wrote it about something that I think anyone who's really listening could hear. So my manager's like, "No, no, no, you definitely have to continue this song. Go back in the studio and finish it."

(Voice memo)

Rachel: I have a little voice memo of how the bridge got made.

(Voice memo)

Rachel: There's a lot of like me spitting things out that are probably bad and then them interpreting them and being like, "OK Rach, I think what you mean by that is this." They were, they were really beautiful at doing that, that day.

(Voice memo)

(Voice memo fades)

Rachel: The words are, "Through to the other side, I'll survive because I'm a fighter. Through to the other side, imma fight, because I'm a survivor."

(Vocals: "Through to the other side, baby, I survive / 'Cause you know I am a fighter")

Rachel: And it's a chant. We envisioned a humongous group of girls, like a girl choir stomping and singing it together. In reality, it's just me and Nate but [laughter].

(Vocals: "Through to the other side, baby, I survive / 'Cause you know I am a fighter / Through to the other side, baby, I'm on fire")

Rachel: And that came from a really raw place of, “I need to believe this right now.” I write those things when I need to believe them. I’m not always there emotionally, when I write a phrase like that, but it’s where I want to get to, almost like an affirmation.

(Synth with beat)

Rachel: So we finished the song on the 9th, and we were like, “This feels great.” I kind of washed my hands of it and was like, “Cool, I’m going to move on.” And then there was some discussion about, “Well this could be the single, this is a contender for the single.” You know, that wasn’t in my mind, the single. That was just something that was special, that I was glad that I had written. So it became a whole other struggle of like getting back in the mindset of being okay with being the girl with the fist in the air, and opening myself up to that again. But eventually I said, “OK, if this is going to be the single, then I really want to get this production perfect. And I don’t feel like it’s perfect right now, and I think I know who could make it perfect.”

(“Diamonds” by RIHANNA)

Rachel: Stargate is a duo from Norway, they are production badasses, and they’ve done everything from Beyoncé to Katy Perry, “Firework,” Rihanna “Diamonds,” a ton of Sia stuff. They’re incredible. So I approached Stargate about it, and by the way, I got met with like a lot of everyone telling me, “No, it’s never going to work, they’re too busy, they’re not going to do this.” And I was like, “Eh, let’s not say no before I ask ok?” So I approached Stargate.

(Music fades)

Hrishikesh: Stargate’s made up of Tor Hermansen and Mikkel Eriksen.

Rachel: Tor was in another session, so it was just me and Mikkel. So I played the song for him and he loved it. He said, “Of course, I would love to produce it, I’ll do additional production on it.” And I didn’t think it needed much, I just thought it needed like a couple tweaks, a little tightening. So I thought that that’s what he would be able to do, was kind of thin it out. But he did kind of almost a remix.

(Stargate version)

Rachel: He also sped it up. I came in and heard it, and I was like, “Woah, woah, woah, woah, no! What the hell is going on? This is so fast.”

(Stargate version ends)

Rachel: So it wasn't totally perfect, but he did something that was mind blowing to me, and took the drums completely out of the chorus. OK, so if you go to the Jarrad version, there's drums in the chorus.

(Jarrad version)

Rachel: So there's drums and it feels good. But you couldn't understand what I was saying, and the lyrics were the most important part of the song to me, and it just felt like a party. And I didn't want the song to just be a party, I wanted people to hear what I was saying. So he brilliantly made it a drop.

(Stargate version)

Rachel: It does that [mimics a sound effect].

(Stargate version)

Rachel: We had like 6 versions that we did. Sorry Mikkel, that's a lot of work. But we finished June 28th.

Hrishikesh: And when did it come out?

Rachel: August 20th.

(Piano)

Rachel: And all of a sudden, I realized I was going to start turning outward again. And not only that, but with a song that could potentially be divisive. So I was scared. I was scared to release it. But I haven't gotten any backlash, because I haven't talked about it politically. I definitely avoided and skirted it. I've done interviews but I've really kind of avoided any questions about the election. But it hasn't been fun because it also doesn't feel good to not say what you really think about something. How people react to it is not under

(Synth joins)

Rachel: my control. And to not be able to tell the truth about where the song came from and its roots and who it's really for,

(Music ends)

Rachel: that hurts too.

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Broken Glass," by Rachel Platten, in its entirety.

("Broken Glass" by RACHEL PLATTEN)

Hrishikesh: For more on Rachel Platten, visit songexploder.net. You can see the music video for "Broken Glass," and there's a link to buy the song.

Song Exploder is produced by me, along with Christian Koons, with help from intern Olivia Wood. Special thanks to Mike Taylor and Greg Hale from Hillary for America. And Jody Avirgan from the FiveThirtyEight politics podcast, and Bryan Younce, and Julie Shapiro. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia, from PRX, a curated network of extraordinary, cutting edge podcasts made possible by listeners like you. Learn more at radiotopia.fm. You can find every episode of Song Exploder at songexploder.net or wherever you download podcasts. You can follow the show on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram @SongExploder. Let me know what you think of this episode. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.

Rachel: You're going to, I know you're going to do one of those introductions where you're like, "Rachel Platten was in my studio and she was very hesitant to talk about this song. Here we dive into 'Broken Glass.'" [laughter]

Hrishikesh: I can use that.

Rachel: And I'm going to be listening like, "Ahhhh! Why did I tell him everything?"

Hrishikesh: [laughter]